



Indiana State
Department of Health
Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts: Chickenpox (Varicella)

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a very contagious disease that is caused by the varicella-zoster virus. Chickenpox is usually a mild childhood rash illness, but it can cause serious complications, including pneumonia, inflammation of the brain tissue or inflammation of the fluid surrounding the brain and spinal cord, bacterial skin infections, and even death (especially in older adults and those whose immune systems are weakened).

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Symptoms generally begin about 2 weeks after being exposed to someone with chickenpox or shingles. Symptoms include fever, fatigue, weakness, and rash. The rash first appears as flat, red bumps that become raised, filled with fluid similar to blisters (vesicles) and may severely itch. About five days after rash appears, the blisters rupture and scab over.

Some children and adults who receive 1 or even 2 doses of the vaccine will have a mild case of chickenpox known as breakthrough disease. When this happens, the disease is often very mild with fewer spots (<50) that may not turn into vesicles, but look more like insect bites. A breakthrough case may never develop a fever during the course of illness. Lab testing is recommended to verify these types of cases, wherever possible, since other conditions could present similarly.

How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox is spread from person to person when an infected person coughs or sneezes or by direct contact with the raised or fluid-filled lesions. A person with chickenpox is considered highly contagious for at least 2 days before the rash appears until the rash has scabbed over or completely faded (in mild cases). Much less commonly, a person can get chickenpox from direct contact with a person who has shingles lesions.

Who is at risk for getting chickenpox?

Anyone who has not had two doses of chickenpox vaccine or has not had the disease is at risk for getting chickenpox. Those less than one year of age and those over fifteen years of age are at greater risk for complications. People with weakened immune systems are also at greater risk for severe illness and complications.

Children who were diagnosed with chickenpox before 12 months of age may not have fully developed immunity and may be at increased risk of getting chickenpox again.

Chickenpox in pregnant women less than 20 weeks pregnant or during the week of delivery can result in severe birth defects and sometimes fatal illness in the infant.

How do I know if I or my child has chickenpox?

Consult with your health care provider if you or your child has been exposed to someone with chickenpox or if either of you has symptoms. Your health care provider may collect blood or swab samples of the skin lesions to test for chickenpox. Chickenpox is most often diagnosed based on the symptoms experienced. If you or your child have ever had chickenpox or have received two doses of chickenpox vaccine, it is unlikely that you will get chickenpox. Many other organisms can cause rash illnesses than can resemble chickenpox.

How is chickenpox treated?

Treatment focuses on relieving the symptoms of the illness. Your doctor may recommend prescription or over-the-counter medications or lotions for symptoms. Fingernails should be trimmed to prevent infection from scratching, and bedding should be changed frequently to help prevent skin infections.

How is chickenpox prevented?

There is a safe and effective vaccine to prevent chickenpox. If you or your child have not had chickenpox, or have no record of having the chickenpox vaccine, talk to your health care provider to decide if you should receive the vaccine. In the state of Indiana, schools and licensed child care providers require proof of vaccination or history of having chickenpox for entry into school. Two doses of chickenpox vaccine provide the best protection against chickenpox. If someone at risk for getting chickenpox comes into contact with a contagious person vaccine can be given within 5 days of exposure to prevent disease or lessen symptoms if any present.

All information presented is intended for public use. More information on Varicella and vaccinations can be found at:

- <http://www.cdc.gov/chickenpox/about/overview.html>
- <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/varicella/default.htm>
- <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/hcp/acip-recs/vacc-specific/varicella.html>